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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated a program for meeting the needs of at-risk students in a Virginia elementary school. The program, known as the "community approach," was designed to foster the success of at-risk students by increasing parent involvement, allowing more time for student development, improving students' self-esteem and self-control, and encouraging cross-grade communication and collaboration among teachers. For the evaluation study, the teachers, the principal, and the instructional coordinator were interviewed to determine the effectiveness of the designed program. The results indicated that, overall, the community approach was regarded by interviewees as a successful program. Responses indicated that allowing time for student development is pertinent to the situation at the school, parents are more comfortable and more likely to communicate with teachers, the approach has had an impact on the self-esteem and self-control of students, and teacher collaboration was increased across grade levels. Responses also indicated that cooperation was one of the most powerful tools in constructing better programs for children. (Three appendices include interview questions and a summary of recommendations. Contains 23 references.) (AP)

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Serving the Needs of At-Risk Students:

The Community Approach and Teacher Perceptions of Its Effectiveness

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Abstract

This study is concerned with Washington Elementary School's novel approach to meeting the needs of its at-risk population. This plan, known as the "community approach", aims to foster the success of at-risk students through increasing parent involvement, allowing more time for student development, improving students' self-esteem and self control, and encouraging cross-grade communication and collaboration among teachers. To examine the effectiveness of this program, the teachers, the principal, and the instructional coordinator were interviewed. Overall, the community approach was regarded by interviewees as an extremely successful program.

INTRODUCTION

As society changes, children's needs change. Recent shifts in household incomes, family structures, and parents' educational support and behavioral expectations of children have placed certain students at a disadvantage in school. One must ask then, how can schools adapt to meet the needs of an increasing number of at-risk students? In our study, we strove to determine more precisely what variables affect a child's performance in school and then to uncover ways to address the needs of at-risk students.

For the purposes of this study the term "at-risk" is defined as the impoverishing of a child's world so that the child is in danger of failing to acquire an adequate level of academic and social skills. Such a broad definition allowed us to fully examine the three main factors which can affect a child's success in school. One factor is the socio-economic status of the child's family. This often shapes the quality of the child's living conditions which can, in turn, affect his/her learning. A second component which must be considered is the child's family environment, regardless of his/her socio-economic status. Included are such variables as the family's structure, parents' emphasis on education, stability of the home, and parental involvement. A third component which can place a student at-risk is his/her behavior, reflected in the student's

social interaction both in and out of the classroom.

After discussing how these three components affect student learning and achievement, we will discuss common approaches to meeting the needs of at-risk students. Then, our study explores the effectiveness of one school's novel approach to this issue. Finally, we focus on the implications of our findings for not only this school but also for educators and the researchers in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW: AT-RISK FACTORS AND PROGRAMS

Socio-economic Status

The issue of how and if S.E.S. affects student achievement gained national prominence when Coleman et al. released a national study for the United States Department of Health Education and Welfare in 1966. The study gathered information from a large data base of 580,000 students. Coleman found that "...socioeconomic status bears a strong relationship to academic achievement" (1966, p.253). Since then, numerous researchers have studied and confirmed this relationship. Researchers measure a student's socioeconomic status by using several indicators: parents' educational level, occupation of the parents, family income, and location of residence (White, 1982). Generally, researchers gather information about a student's socioeconomic status (S.E.S.) based upon his/her eligibility to Chapter I and/or free and reduced lunch programs. Researchers normally measure achievement based upon standardized test scores for elementary students, and standardized test scores and grade point averages for high school students.

Since Coleman's research, it has become more and more crucial for educators to understand the relationship between students' low achievement and

S.E.S. and to devise ways to improve these students' school performance. From 1979 to 1989 alone, the number of children living in poverty increased by 2.2 million. Now, one in five school-aged children comes from families with incomes below the poverty line (Manning, 1995, p.18). While, of course, not every low-income student is affected, such children are significantly more likely than other students to exhibit lower academic achievement, low motivation, poor health, high mobility between schools and instability of family relationships. (Alspaugh, 1991; Manning 1995).

Family Environment

The role of the family in a child's education is a second crucial factor to examine when determining if a child is at-risk. While the socio-economic status of a family shapes its home environment to a certain extent, research clearly demonstrates that family variables have a significant impact on a child's performance in school independent of social class (Vacha, & McLaughlin, 1992). However, in order to plan programs that will effectively serve at-risk children and their families, educators must distinguish between the family variables that the schools can affect and those that it cannot.

Family Variables Independent of the Schools' Influence

Recent changes in **family structure** have had a profound impact on education. The number of single-parent households grew from 3.8 million in 1970 to 9.7 million in 1990, increasing 39% in 20 years, despite the fact the rate of growth in the total number of households slowed substantially during these years (Rawlings, 1993, p.xiv). Women head most (86%) of these households, 54% of which are below the poverty line, compared to 13% of all other family structures (Hofferth, 1987). Besides the disadvantages mentioned in section 1 of the Literature Review, poverty is also strongly associated with low levels of educational resources in the home (Vacha et al, 1992). Moreover, regardless of socio-economic status, single parents often have less time than couples for activities in and out of school that support children's learning. As a result, several studies have shown that children of single parents are more likely to be at-risk of academic failure, even when social class is controlled (e.g. Coleman 1989; Dormbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987, cited in Vacha et al, 1992). Further, as Eitzen (1992) warns, female-headed households usually don't offer children male role models, nor do students encounter many men to emulate in elementary schools (cited in Stephen et al, 1993).

Another family variable which affects student outcomes and which schools cannot adjust is **parent's level of education**. In a longitudinal study that followed the progress of at-risk children in Chicago schools from kindergarten through grade 4, Reynolds and Bezrucko (1993) found that parents' education was significantly related to entering kindergartners' cognitive readiness, which in turn affected their performance throughout the early elementary years. Performance measures included not only the students' academic achievement, but also their adjustment to school (teacher ratings of child's self-confidence, participation in discussions, responsibility, ability get along with others, etc.).

A last major independent family variable affecting a child's educational success is **family mobility**. Children who switch schools face certain disadvantages. They and their parents may be unfamiliar with the new school or school system. Relationships with teachers have to be re-established. Moreover, academic content is often difficult to make up, especially if the move occurs during the middle of the year. Accordingly, researchers find that "at-risk" status is strongly associated with students' mobility between schools (Vacha et al, 1992). In Reynolds' study, for instance, 56% of at-risk students in grade 4 had changed schools at least once since kindergarten

(Reynolds, 1993).

Family Variables that Schools Can Influence

One trait commonly found in families of at-risk students is they have less **cultural capital** other children's families, which Vacha et al (1992) defines as "parental attitudes, values and behavior patterns that ... [positively] influence their children's school success" (p.12). Cultural capital consists of four components that are all significantly related to a child's performance in school (Coleman, 1989, cited in Vacha, 1992):

1. Parents' familiarity with the school system & access to information about teachers, educational programs, etc. through informal networks
2. Parent's comfort level with teachers and other school personnel
3. Student's exposure to "high culture" (e.g. art, music)
4. Student's access to material and intellectual resources

While low measures on any of these components increases the likelihood that a child will be at-risk, all of these components can be addressed and affected by caring educators in the child's life.

Another aspect of the family's role in education which can be changed is **parental involvement** in the schooling process. No matter what form it takes - conferencing with teachers, assisting with lessons, taking part in class trips,

attending PTO meetings - parent involvement has repeatedly been demonstrated as a positive influence on children's achievement in school, even when socio-economic status was held constant (Epstein, 1987 cited in Adelman, 1994; Reynolds, 1993). Unfortunately, it also has been shown that parent involvement levels significantly drop as students progress through school (Epstein, 1987). This is especially disturbing considering parent involvement also affects students' attendance, behavior, and attitudes which, as we will describe, are other factors impacting student learning.

School Performance

Attendance

In addition to S.E.S. and family environment, rate of attendance serves as a factor in the identification of an at-risk student. Persistent absence from school, or truancy, prohibits a student from receiving adequate academic instruction, thus making the student at-risk for academic failure. "A chronic truant is defined as a student missing at least eighteen days without a valid excuse. Under this definition, 4.1% of students are chronic truants. Similarly, on any given day, 10% of the nation's children and adolescents miss school" (Rudd, 1991, cited in Manning, 1995, p.140). Social, psychological, as well as educational aspects

factor into a pupil's attendance rate and the influence of each of these factors on attendance varies according to the individual circumstances of the pupil.

According to an examination of attendance in the primary grades through the secondary grades in Louisiana Schools, the characteristics of schools with low attendance rates are "(1) schools in metropolitan areas, (2) middle and secondary schools, (3) low S.E.S. schools" (Crone, 1993, p.1). Crone concluded that the Caucasian students in these schools have greater problems with attendance when compared to their African American peers. This finding is consistent with the research of Glascock and Tashakkori (1993) which found that when Caucasian students became the minority, there were significant drops in their self-esteem, a variable related to attendance (cited in Crone, 1993, p.14).

Although it is difficult to identify a universal cause of persistent school absenteeism, it is not difficult to recognize that attendance is extremely significant as an indicator of school performance. As a result of chronic absenteeism, "learners fall behind, miss vital information, lose interest in school and learning, and may eventually drop out of school altogether" (Manning, 1995, p.140).

Behavior

According to Rush and Vitale, "at-risk students are the children who exhibit behaviors that interfere with attaining an education" (Rush & Vitale, 1994,

p.325). Typically, behavior problems are common among those with psychological vulnerabilities, those whose families face high stress with low social support, and those whose lives change significantly, through divorce or financial problems. Disruptive behaviors may develop as compensation for feelings of pain. Further, students may "exhibit low self-esteem, mood disorders, identity confusion, low tolerance for frustration, and a host of other emotional and behavior disorders" (Bradshaw, 1988, cited in Webb, 1992, p.96).

More importantly, these early conduct problems can predict poor school achievement (Farnworth, Schweinhart, & Berrueta-Clement, 1985, cited in Tremblay et al, 1992, p.64). Gaddy (1988) has also found empirical evidence linking misbehavior in school and poor academic performance (cited in Brady, Tucker, & Harris, 1992, p.43). In addition to the display of behavioral excesses, such as noncompliance, arguing, and aggression, it is likely that an at-risk student will fail to develop adequate social skills and as a result may have few friends, may be noncooperative and bossy, may not know how to reward others, may lack affection, may have few problem solving skills, and may constantly seek attention (Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis, 1993). Thus, the research leads one to conclude that chronic misbehavior and persistent absenteeism are factors which affect a student's social skills attainment as well as academic achievement.

PROGRAMS TARGETED TOWARD AT-RISK STUDENTS

Educators have long recognized that certain students are at-risk of not acquiring adequate academic and social skills. Most programs developed for these children have targeted the individual students and/or their parents in an attempt to affect the student's progress. However, while these programs have improved the performance of some students, many students are still not succeeding in school. Consequently, new intervention approaches often focus on the adaptive potential of the school itself.

Head Start

Head Start, a federal program for pre-school children of low-income families, was launched in 1965 as an eight-week summer experiment designed to help fight the cycle of poverty. According to the Head Start Bureau, the program was "enthusiastically received by educators, child development specialists, community leaders, and parents across the nation" (Head Start, 1993, p.2). By 1993, Head Start addressed the needs of 721,000 children and their families through the operation of approximately 36,300 classrooms and 600 home visiting programs (Creating A 21st Century Head Start, 1993).

The Head Start program is managed by local non-profit organizations

and is found in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories. Eligibility for the Head Start program is based on family income. A child must be living in a family whose income falls below the federal poverty line, which in 1993 was $14,350 for a family of four (Creating a 21st Century Head Start, 1993). However, some policies exist which allow 10% of Head Start children to come from families whose incomes exceed the federal poverty line.

Most children who attend Head Start are between the ages of three and five years of age. These children most likely attend a program which is operated in a center and lasts for a half-day. However, there are some programs in existence which are full day and some programs which are home based. Nevertheless, these programs are committed to providing the children with opportunities to grow mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Head Start provides its students with a variety of learning experiences. In the classroom, the students are taught the concepts of words and numbers. Also, there are learning centers in the classroom which the students have a chance to explore daily. Some of the centers the students may choose from are a housekeeping center, a music center, an art center, a block center, a science center, and a reading center. Students engage in outdoor play as well. Throughout their Head Start experience, children are encouraged to discuss

their feelings and to develop positive self-images.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is the largest federal aid program for elementary and secondary schools; currently about 75% of all elementary schools have Chapter 1 services. Established in 1965, the function of Chapter 1 is to provide federal money to school districts around the nation based on how many low-income students each serves. School districts then target the money on those schools with the highest concentrations of low-income students (Levin 1993). Hence both national and local organizations recognize that low S.E.S. can affect a child's performance in school.

However, the schools choose which students receive Chapter 1 services based on the students' levels of achievement rather than family income. Each school decides how to organize their Chapter 1 program. The law requires that both Chapter 1 and classroom teachers coordinate the Chapter 1 program with the regular instructional program. The school district, principals, teachers, and parents must all be involved in developing and implementing Chapter 1 programs. Currently, many schools now use Chapter 1 funds to hire special teachers, aides, and tutors to work with Chapter 1 students on reading and math

outside of the regular classroom (Levin, 1993).

Desired outcomes are stated in terms of the basic and more advanced skills that all students are expected to master. These desired outcomes are not simply higher test scores. Students are expected to achieve the same goals as others, and therefore are provided the extra help to achieve these goals (Levin, 1993).

School-within-a School

While Chapter 1 and Head Start have helped improve the performance of some at-risk students, many others are left out due to limited funding, space, or availability of these programs. In addition, many students who have participated are still not performing to their potential. In other words, intervention at the individual student or parent level has not been sufficient to ensure a student's success. For this reason, educational theorists have begun to examine ways the school atmosphere, philosophy and organization can be modified to meet the needs of both identified and unidentified at-risk students.

The researcher who spear-headed this intellectual movement, and for our purposes, whose ideas profoundly affected the new organization of the school we studied, is John I. Goodlad, author of *A Place Called School*. After

conducting extensive national studies of students and public schools, Goodlad made several recommendations for re-structuring schools in order to help prevent pupils' academic failure. Calling his organizational approach "school-within-a-school", he first recommended that larger schools --which he had found impersonal and alienating for both students and teachers -- be separated into smaller schools within the same building. In Goodlad's view, each of these smaller schools or "houses" would have its own curriculum, students and staff. Further, each house would conduct its activities independently of the other houses, sharing only certain school facilities (e.g. library, gym) and using these facilities at different times (Goodlad 1984).

Goodlad also recommends that the houses be organized vertically. In other words, rather than clustering the same grade classes together, houses should be created from one class and one teacher from each of three or four consecutive grades. Once formed, Goodlad continues, the houses would eliminate the graded structure of schooling, instead emphasizing continuous progress in students' acquisition of skills. He argues that the advantages of this arrangement would be three-fold. First, students who are more advanced in a certain skill could work on this skill with the teacher responsible for higher-level instruction. Second, students who entered school behind their peers in

specific areas (at-risk students) would have the time and support of 3-4 teachers and years to develop academic skills. Third, Goodlad holds that schools-within-schools are better for the personal welfare of the students. He argues that regular schools foster a "disjuncture between students and teachers", where both parties tend not to know, much less adapt to, each other's lives and concerns (Goodlad, 1984, p.312). In contrast, Goodlad holds, a vertical organization would build long-term relationships between a small group of students and teachers, providing "three or four years of continuity and ... a reduction in both student alienation and teacher frustration" (1984, p.312).

While Goodlad mainly focuses on secondary schooling, he maintains that this organizational change should be made at all levels. He asserts that elementary education should be divided into two phases: a primary phase (ages 4-7) and an elementary phase (ages 8-11). Recognizing that children who have not had pre-school often fall behind in regular schooling, Goodlad advocates school entry at age four, to give all students the advantage of early childhood education (Goodlad, 1984).

Further, by spending their first 3-4 years of school with a small group of peers and teachers, students' learning experiences would be more personal and individualized. According to Goodlad, the non-graded approach would allow

more time for periodic assessment and intervention to improve students' performance. Meeting as a team, teachers in each house could identify those students progressing more slowly and modify instruction to address students' needs. In addition, older or more advanced peers in the house could help those struggling with certain skills. Goodlad explains that such a developmental approach is purely common sense: "the learning we do outside of schools -- where we spend the bulk of our lives -- is not organized by years or grade levels" (1983, p.331). Moreover, such an adaptive, supportive learning environment promotes an understanding in the classroom that everyone learns at different rates in different subjects and that each child's learning is to be celebrated and nurtured by both teachers and peers.

SPECIFIC APPROACH AT CLARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Inspired by such theories and research findings, the staff at Washington, an elementary school in Virginia, decided to fundamentally re-organize their early elementary program. While they may not have known the exact figures (77% of children on free or reduced lunch; 68% of children from single-parent households, 47% of children living in subsidized housing, etc.), they had seen the effects low socio-economic status and home environment have had on many of Washington students (Williams, 1995).

The Creation of the Community Concept

The changes began in 1990 when Valerie Williams became principal of Washington Elementary School. During classroom observations and conversations with teachers, the new principal sensed both a need in the school and a desire among teachers to make changes wherever necessary in order to better meet the needs of Washington's at-risk students. Ms. Williams then delved into the literature on recent school reforms (e.g. school-within-a-school, non-grading, etc.), passing on several articles to the staff. Together the administrators and the teachers discussed their readings and determined what modifications to make in their program. As Ms. Williams had hoped, the

teachers soon took charge of the process, firing off ideas and suggestions based on their first-hand experience of what works in the classroom. Reflecting upon this exciting time, Ms. Williams concluded, "I planted the seed... [but] the staff made it grow" (Williams, 1995).

What sprouted was a "community concept" which combined what the teachers believed to be the best elements of current school reforms concerning at-risk students. In this concept, a kindergarten, a first grade, and a second grade class would be placed together in one wing/corner of the school and be called a community (see Appendix A). Children entering a community in kindergarten would remain in that community for their first three years of school, moving up each year with the same class to a teacher they all knew from the close contact of the community. In addition, every day students would spend a portion of their time in a "discovery room" with children from other grades in their community. The discovery room constituted a fourth room belonging to the community as a whole, equipped with learning centers and overseen by instructional assistants. Teachers and instructional assistants in the community would meet periodically to plan units and community activities.

Intended Outcomes of the Community Approach

Many of the aims of the community approach echoed researchers recommendations for fostering the success of at-risk students. One goal of the program was to **increase parent involvement** in the schooling process. Washington staff hoped that if parents knew their child's first and second grade teachers beforehand, parents would feel more comfortable communicating with them and following their advice for educational activities at home when the child moved up to these grades. Perhaps this aspect of the community concept would even entice parents not to move. Also, by interconnecting a child's kindergarten through second grade experience, the staff sought to reduce the likelihood that parental involvement would decrease as children got older (Williams, 1995).

Another aim of the community concept was to **allow more time for children to develop**. Besides the fact that young children develop at different rates, Ms. Williams points out that many of Washington's students enter school already at a disadvantage: "[They] come in not being school-ready... [they] haven't had people reading to them, talking to them, giving them the experiences to build their knowledge foundation..." (Williams, 1995). In other words, these children have low levels of cultural capital. Therefore, Ms.

Williams asserts, "Children should have three years to get where they need to go", especially considering the long-term negative effects retaining students can have on their academic performance (Slavin, 1989).

In the community approach, a child who is below the norm at the end of kindergarten or first grade is moved up to the next grade to give him/her a chance to catch up instead of being stigmatized a failure. Because teachers in a community know who they will have in their class next year, they can plan strategies to meet their new students' needs. In addition, teachers can send students who need extra practice on a certain skill (e.g. letter recognition) to another teacher in the community who is currently conducting a lesson on that skill.

While academic progress is important, teachers at Washington also believe students' affective outcomes are a high priority. In particular, the staff hoped the community concept would **improve students' self-esteem and self-control**. Ms. Williams reports that the emotional needs of some students at Washington are not being met outside the school. These children feel neglected and have not learned how to control their emotions. Whatever their home lives were like - lonely, violent, constantly changing - the community experience at Washington could provide children with a sense of stability and belonging.

Instead of facing a new teacher and a new class each year, the children would grow together each year, led by the few adults they had come to know well. In such a supportive, constant environment, the Washington staff thought, children would be less likely to feel alienated from school and misbehave (Williams, 1995).

A last major goal of the new program at Washington was to **encourage cross-grade communication and collaboration** among teachers. Before the community approach, when several children entered a grade below the academic norm, teachers of that grade held the teachers of the grade(s) below them partially responsible for the new students' weaknesses. Not only do such comments breed negative feelings among staff members, they also do the children a disservice, because the conclusions are not based on a knowledge of how much the children knew when they entered school or how far they have come since then. Through the community approach, the staff intended to increase the teachers' knowledge of other grades' activities and promote cooperative efforts to improve students' progress. Within a community, the kindergarten through second grade teachers would work together as a team to plan instruction and intervention. They would then base their expectations of incoming students on a knowledge of the students' personalities, experiences

and prior achievement (Williams, 1995).

Implementing the New Approach

With these goals in mind, the teachers at Washington Elementary School decided to pilot the community project the first year. Six teachers volunteered and two communities were formed. In the summer before the 1991-1992 school year began, the school sent a letter to the parents, inviting them to come to Washington to learn more about the communities. The turnout for the meeting was "tremendous" (Williams, 1995). Parents whose children were placed a pilot community then attended a community dinner where they could meet their children's kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers. The school year began and the principal constantly met with the community teachers. Together they developed student portfolios to pass back and forth between teachers in the community. They tackled as a team the new problems they encountered. By the end of the year, the kindergarten through second grade teachers outside the community had decided they wanted to try the new approach. Two new communities were created and from the Fall of 1992 forward, all students grade two and below at Washington were in the community approach.

METHODS

This study was conducted at Washington Elementary, a school located in a small city in Virginia. Presently, 380 students attend Washington Elementary and of these 380 students, 60% are African American, 35% are Caucasian, and 5% are Bi-racial. Additionally, 68% of Washington students reside in single-mother households and 47% live in subsidized housing. Thus, it is not surprising that 77% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch.

Washington School currently has an average pupil/teacher ratio of 23:1. The school employs 18 classroom teachers, 2 special education teachers, a speech pathologist, 3 Chapter I teachers, a music teacher, a librarian, an enrichment teacher, and a physical education teacher. Further, the school employs an instructional coordinator whom we decided to interview as we were conducting our research. Our interview with the instructional coordinator provided us with valuable information which helped us to narrow the focus of our study.

From this point we set up an interview with the principal at Washington Elementary. We entered the interview with a preset list of questions and we asked her permission to tape record the interview (see Appendix B). Following

the interview we met to listen to the tape and to determine what the principal felt were the intended outcomes of the community approach. Once we identified these intended outcomes, we used these to shape the questions which we decided to ask of the six community classroom teachers we selected to interview (see Appendix C). We chose to interview six teachers, a kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher in an original pilot community, and a kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher from a relatively new community. Since there are three of us conducting this study, we each interviewed two teachers. We began our interviews by asking their permission to tape record the session. We then asked our list of questions and at the close of our interviews we assured the interviewees that the interviews would remain anonymous.

We then met to review the taped interviews. We made copies of the interviews so that each of us would have a copy of every interview. Also, each researcher took extensive notes on the two interviews which they conducted and provided the other two researchers with these notes. We each listened to every interview and looked for themes in the teacher responses to determine our results of the study.

RESULTS

Allowing Time for Student Development

Upon implementing the Community concept at Washington, one goal was to allow more time for children to develop. Interviews with teachers shows that this goal is pertinent to the situation at Washington. Teachers report the background of students when they enter Washington to be varied and many students are at a disadvantage for success in learning. Teachers report that many students come to school without a broad base of life experiences, or as one teacher put it, "many students are close to being deprived of experience". Further, in the classroom, students' pre-school experience ranges from none to extensive. Students live with various parenting situations including a large number of students from single parent homes. Several Washington parents have little or no college education. Furthermore, teachers report that many students live with low economic levels, which can seriously affect their achievement. As one teacher explains, "a child who is concerned about what they are going to eat at night is at risk because they can't learn because they're in a survivor mode and 'what am I gonna eat' is more important than what this word is on this page

or how to solve this math problem."

When asked to provide their own definitions of "at-risk" students, the teachers overwhelmingly focused on the home environment including poor nutrition, lack of parental involvement, family instability, drugs or alcohol abuse. Lack of parental involvement in the lives of the student as well as the stability of the home environment is considered a prime factor affecting the success of students. Depending on their own definitions, teachers considered anywhere from 3-5% to the majority of their students to be at-risk. However, all of the teachers we interviewed felt that the new community concept had established an environment which promoted greater social and academic development of at-risk students than the previous traditional model. They responded that this approach was providing students with security in the form of consistency, support, stability, and trust. Several teachers explained that this results from the fact that upon entering kindergarten, students know their first and second grade teacher. The teachers develop a knowledge of and rapport with the student before he or she even enters their classroom, providing the educational and emotional supports perhaps lacking at home.

Parent Involvement

All of the teachers in our study stressed the importance of parental involvement in a child's education. Even though many of Washington's parents are working, single, and have low levels of educational attainment, teachers reported several positive trends in parent involvement since the community approach was implemented at Washington. At the same time, a few aspects of parental involvement remained unchanged.

Positive Outcomes

Most of the teachers we interviewed asserted that, under the community approach, parents are more comfortable and more likely to communicate with teachers. The teachers based this conclusion not only on compliments from parents, but also on the greater number of parents who now contact them, attend conferences, and participate in PTO meetings.

In the teachers' view, it is the communities' social activities - community dinners at the beginning of the year, luncheons and programs throughout the year and end-of-the-year community picnics - that foster these close parent-school connections. As one first grade teacher explains, "[I first] talk to parents when I'm not a threat to them. I don't have their child, I'm not calling them to discuss a problem - It's just a social situation". According to several teachers

interviewed, such a non-threatening environment especially helps involve parents who may have otherwise felt intimidated by the school because of their own weak or negative school background. The "social situations" in the community approach welcome parents into the school and provide them with opportunities to develop relationships with teachers before their children are in a particular teacher's class.

Unsolved Issues

While on the whole the impact of Washington's community approach on parent involvement has been positive, some aspects of parent involvement apparently remain unchanged. The teachers we interviewed did not report an increase in parent-child educational activities in the home. In addition, the teachers seemed divided on the issue of whether the community approach helps prevent the decrease in parental involvement as children get older. For instance, a second grade teacher remarked, "If we get them [parents] in kindergarten, ... chances are they are going to stay involved, so I do see that it [the community approach] has helped a whole lot". In contrast, another (first grade) teacher maintained that parents are still "more likely to come in kindergarten than in first". In particular, some teachers voiced concern about a continued dearth of parent volunteers. In one teachers view, a temporary surge

in volunteering occurred when the community first started, but this was followed by a return to the low pre-community levels.

However, despite these concerns, all the teachers in our study viewed Washington parents' increased participation and comfort level in conferences, school programs and PTO meeting as a huge success of the community concept. Teachers were less concerned with parents' volunteering patterns and educational activities with their children at home because parents' childrearing practices and free time are more difficult for schools to change. During the school day, schools can provide the educational experiences and attention some children lack at home.

Self-Esteem and Self-Control

Overall, the teachers we interviewed reported that the community approach at Washington School has had an impact on the self-esteem and self-control of its students. Of the teachers interviewed, all expressed that the K-2 communities had positive effects on student self-esteem. The most agreed upon effect of the communities was that they build a family atmosphere and the children know they have a group to which they belong. Regarding her students in the community, one teacher commented "they created a family and they'll

never forget that, even if somebody moves - what the kids do for each other as a family raises their self-esteem and they just feel loved." Many of the teachers in our study also mentioned that another positive effect on self-esteem is that the students have more emotional security because they know who their teacher will be next year and they feel comfortable going into any room within the community because it is their home. Further, the discovery room was viewed by many of the interviewed teachers as a great outlet for building self-esteem. One teacher comments, "The discovery room fosters multi-age interaction and enhances social skills and confidence, especially when tutoring across ages."

There are two additional positive effects that communities have had on student self-esteem at Washington Elementary. First, within the communities, differences are accepted and the students learn to interact better with one another because they feel freer to be themselves. For instance, one second grade teacher related that the previous year she had a child with a bladder problem in her class and "in most situations the kids really would have teased that child and he would have been ridiculed a lot for his problem but because the kids had been together during his surgery and knew what was wrong with him, he was very accepted and kids didn't even notice it anymore." Secondly, the interviewed teachers also felt that the peer relationships in communities are

a lot deeper than they would be in a traditional classroom setting, owing to the fact that the students stay together for three years. The students do not have to worry that their friends in their class this year might be in a different class next year.

There is also a general consensus among the teachers interviewed that the community approach has affected the self-control and behavior of the students, both positively and negatively. Some reported positive effects of the community approach on student self-control and behavior are that through community interactions, the students learn to work cooperatively and to imitate appropriate behaviors modeled by other students. Further, the teachers in the community are consistent with classroom management strategies and they hold similar expectations of behavior within the community which reduces the rate of misbehavior. The teachers in our study also maintain that the students learn to respect other adults than just their assigned teacher for the year because essentially they have three teachers. Also, there is less need for the students to show off in front of one another because they come to know each other so well. A final reported positive effect comes from the communication about students between community teachers which allows them to prepare for a student's misbehavior before he/she walks into their classroom. Therefore, they can

focus on preventative rather than corrective management strategies.

Unfortunately, the communities have fostered negative behaviors among some students, according to the interviewed teachers. The students come to know each other so well that they may accept misbehaviors from peers that they would not normally accept. Teachers of our study have also noticed that tension often arises because the students have been together so long and they start to get on each other's nerves. However, one teacher asserts, "close relationships create discord but I wouldn't trade it for a class of non-friends so they don't fight - I want them to care enough about each other to get upset with each other every once and awhile." Of the six interviewed teachers, there was one teacher that did not feel that the communities had an effect on the amount of student misbehavior, but she did comment that the community approach "has given us other outlets in dealing with it because we feel comfortable sending a student next door to sit if they're disrupting class - it's a good time out spot." Thus, our research indicates that the teachers interviewed are in agreement that the community approach is an effective program and that the program has had an impact on the self-esteem and self-control of Washington students.

Teacher Collaboration

A final goal of the community approach was to increase teacher collaboration across grade levels. According to the interviews, teachers reported an increase of collaboration across grade levels, within the same community. Apparently, there has been a decrease in collaboration within the same grade levels. Teachers state that this is because the amount of time they give to the community reduces the amount of time available for them to contribute to other aspects of school organization.

CONCLUSION

Teacher feedback is a valuable resource to use when evaluating a new educational approach. Nevertheless, teachers' responses constitute only one measure of a program's effectiveness. While beyond the scope and time constraints of our study, feedback from students, parents, and administrators would have produced a fuller picture of the community approach's impact at Washington Elementary School. In addition, more direct measures of outcomes would have come closer to "proving" that communities produce positive results. For instance, if we could have asked students questions about their emotional security, relationships with others, attitudes toward academics and so on, we could have determined more precisely how the community approach affects students' self-esteem and social skills. Similarly, if we could have surveyed the parents regarding their participation and perceptions of Washington's new program, we would have reached a more definite assessment of their response to the communities. Lastly, a larger sample of teachers would have added to the representativeness and conclusiveness of our results. For example, the apparent disagreement over whether the community approach increases or decreases misbehavior might have been resolved.

However, while we acknowledge the above restrictions in the scope of

our research, and we hope that our exploratory study of Washington's communities is only the beginning of examinations of similar innovative educational approaches, our research yielded several results that could have a profound impact on the organization of early elementary programs, especially those with high numbers of at-risk students. We derive our recommendations in this area from both the overwhelmingly positive responses of our teachers about the community approach and their insights into its limitations.

First and foremost, it appears that Washington school should celebrate and other schools emulate many aspects of the community program. Each student enters elementary school with a unique set of experiences. For at-risk students, many of these experiences are negative, due to low income, parental support or other disadvantages. Yet, despite these student disadvantages, our teachers reported increased self-esteem and cooperation among students, greater parental comfort and participation in school meetings, closer teacher collaboration across grades and more positive relationships between teachers and their students. For a student whose home life is unstable, the community offers him/her a chance to both grow academically and build closer relationships with the same group of peers and teachers for three years. In other words, the community approach provides students with a significant area

of their life that is characterized by warmth, consistency, and support. Other schools could explore ways, like the community approach, to cultivate such a "family atmosphere" in the early grades where children feel emotionally secure to learn and cooperate with others.

Further, schools could follow Washington's example in providing opportunities for parents to get to know their children's teachers ahead of time, in purely social gatherings. In this way, schools could increase two aspects of their families' cultural capital - the parents' familiarity with the school and their comfort level with the staff. Further, a school could improve communication among teachers of different grades by holding cross-grade meetings or having teachers visit each others' classrooms to observe or teach specific topics. These measures would also build and maintain closer ties between teachers and the students before, during and after they are together for the school year.

However, despite Washington school's many successes, we must address the limitations of the community approach since, as educators, we constantly seek educational improvement for children. First, while greater student self-esteem and cooperation would imply positive academic outcomes, the inability of our teachers to determine if the community approach affects achievement indicates a need for further research measuring this area of student progress.

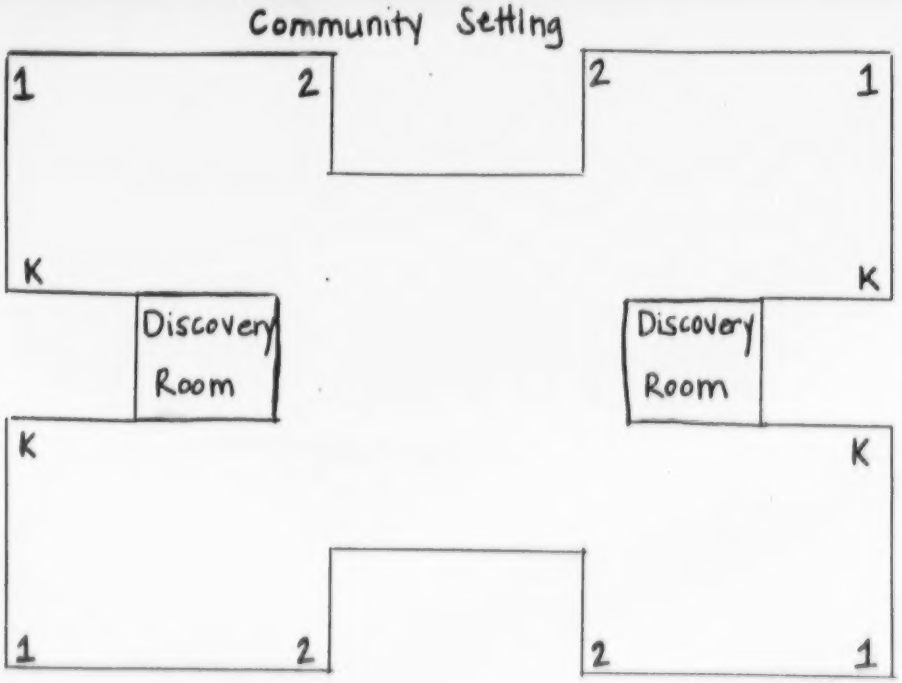
Secondly, most teachers we interviewed expressed that extremely disadvantaged children who had not had pre-school tended to remain behind their peers through second grade, regardless of the communities efforts to increase these students "access to material and intellectual resources" (see discussion of cultural capital). Our teachers explained that many of Washington's families could not afford pre-school and the city-supported pre-school was much too small a program to accommodate these needs. For this reason, we argue that pre-school programs should be expanded, even if it means, and it probably will, a political battle to secure the funding.

Another area of concern expressed by teachers in our study was the low level of parents' intellectual support of children through home activities and school volunteering. We suggest both long and short term approaches to this problem. First, we recommend that researchers should locate and study the elements of successful intervention programs that guide and encourage reluctant parents to spend more educational time with their children. In the short term, to increase students' opportunity to learn from adults, greater efforts should be made to create business-school partnerships on the elementary level. We believe that programs which encourage business people to visit elementary schools to talk about their jobs and to help children learn would be mutually

rewarding for the students and the adults. (For a summary of recommendations, see appendix D.)

* * *

As the Washington staff demonstrated in this study, cooperation is one of the most powerful tools in constructing better futures for our children. While we cannot change family structure, income or mobility, we can create a school environment that promotes student respect for self and others, improves parent-school relationships, and increases teachers' communication with one another. Washington school shows us that all these changes can be made at the school level by those who know their students' needs - the teachers. In this way, our findings are exciting and inspiring. Rather than duplicate Washington school's approach exactly, educators can discuss aspects which are appropriate and possible for their school. In other words, we hope our study has planted a seed that other teachers of other schools will help to grow.


Community Setting
1
2
2
1
K
K
Discovery Room
Discovery Room
K
K
1
2
2
1

APPENDIX A

Appendix B

Principal Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to adopt this approach?
2. How was it implemented? How did you start the program? What were intended outcomes?
3. What do k-2 teachers think before and after the change?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the programs?
5. How would you define an at-risk student? What percent of your population would you consider at-risk?
6. What are the main at-risk programs in the systems now? How do you determine who gets Chapter 1?
7. How does the community address the needs of at-risk students?
8. How are students placed? Do you rely on heterogeneous grouping?
9. How are students and parents initiated into the community?
10. What makes the community stand out in comparison to a traditional classroom setting? What community activities or programs throughout the year help promote cohesion?
11. How have the parents responded to the approach?

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Describe the background of children when they enter Washington (family life, educational and social experiences, affluence)
2. How would you define an at-risk student? What % of your students would you consider to be at-risk?
3. What at-risk factor is most detrimental to school performance?
4. What do you see as the goals of the community approach and how are they being pursued?
5. What strengths do you see in this approach? What drawbacks? What would you change if you could change one aspect of the program?
6. Do you think that the community approach better meets the needs of low income students than the traditional approach did? If so, how?
7. Do you think that the community approach has had an impact on the amount of children on grade-level by the end of second grade?
8. Do you think that the community approach has affected Washington students' self-esteem and social skills?
9. Do you think that implementing the community approach has affected parental involvement in their child's education? If so, in what ways?

10. About what aspects of the community approach have parents complimented or voiced concern?

11. Has the community approach affected the amount of misbehavior in the classroom? If so, how?

12. Has the community approach affected student absentee rate? If so, how?

13. What activities occur throughout the year in your community to promote solidarity?

14. Compare your knowledge of and communication with other grade levels before versus after the community approach was implemented.

Appendix D

Recommendations

For Elementary Schools/Teachers:

* explore ways to cultivate "family atmosphere" like Washington's (e.g. teacher/class advancing together to next grade; rotating teachers for instruction, holding group picnics, plays, etc)
* create social activities for parents to talk with child's future teachers
* establish mechanisms for cross-grade teacher collaboration
* initiate or increase business-school partnerships
* expand pre-school offerings for children from low-income families

For Educational Researchers:

* conduct more lengthy and comprehensive studies of community and similar approaches (e.g. survey/interview students, parents, administrators; compare those in vs. not in communities)
* measure and compare achievement of students in community vs. not in community
* locate and study intervention programs which successfully guide and encourage parents to spend more educational time with their children.

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*For purposes of confidentiality, this name has been changed.